Furman Magazine

Volume 48
Issue 1 *Spring 2005*

Article 12

4-1-2005

Mathematical minds

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Furman women chosen for select Budapest program

Harvard president Lawrence Summers created a storm of controversy earlier this year when he was quoted as suggesting that women may be underrepresented in scientific and quantitative careers because they lack "innate ability" in science and mathematics.

The resulting furor forced Summers to quickly back-track and apologize, although he continues to suffer from the fallout. Had he thought to consult with the Department of Mathematics at Furman before making his comments, though, he could well have avoided trouble in the first place — or at least pointed out an exception to his theory.

At the beginning of spring term 2005, 37 Furman students had declared mathematics as a major. Of that group, 24 were women. And of those 24, four had qualified for one of the most distinguished academic programs available to undergraduate math and computer science students.

The Budapest Semesters in Mathematics offers college juniors and seniors the opportunity to study with eminent Hungarian scholars at Eötvös University and the Mathematical Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Furman students Mary Hedges '05 and Amanda Pascoe '06, selected last spring through a competitive, nationwide application process, spent the 2004 fall term in the Hungarian capital. This spring, Angela Hicks and Lauren Hund (both Class of '06) received word that they will join about 50 other top-flight math students from throughout North America in next fall's program.

And for what it's worth, of the 12 Furman students who have participated in the Budapest program since 1989, six, including the last five, are women.

For those who suffer from math anxiety, the thought of spending an hour, let alone a semester, immersed in such topics as combinatorics, graph theory and abstract algebra might send them screaming into the night. Not so for Hedges and Pascoe, both of whom smile when using the same word to describe the Budapest Semesters program: "Intense."

Furman's Budapest Semesters contingent for 2004 and 2005, from left: Amanda Pascoe, Angela Hicks, Mary Hedges and Lauren Hund.

Granted, they were somewhat used to intensity. Each spent last summer in math-related activities, with Pascoe participating in a National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates program at Central Michigan University and Hedges working at the National Security Agency. So their pumps were well primed for Budapest.

Of the Hungarian approach to mathematics, Hedges says the emphasis is on quality over quantity. "They tend to take a more in-depth approach to specific areas, while in America we tend to do more of a general overview and, in a sense, hit the highlights," she says. "It was rigorous but well worth it to work with such high-quality mathematicians. And the material covered provided great preparation for graduate school."

Pascoe echoes Hedges' sentiments. "The pace is much quicker there and the work more in-depth," she says before adding, "There were a lot of talented professors, and it was great to interact with so many strong students from other universities."

The students also took advantage of their time abroad to travel to such cities as Vienna, Rome and Prague. They quickly adapted to big-city life and enjoyed exploring the city, with its parks, scenic vistas and cultural offerings. (Both are talented musicians.)

Hedges, who hails from Snellville, Ga., shared an apartment in the heart of the "Pesht" (Pest) area with a student from Mount Holyoke College. "I wanted to be on my own," she says. "It was a little weird and scary at first, but it didn't take long to fall in love with the city. And once you learned the system, public transportation offered you easy access to anywhere you needed to go."

Pascoe, a resident of Wilbraham, Mass., was placed with an older couple in the city's "Buda" section. "They'd had Budapest Semesters students for six years but had no interest in learning English," she says of her hosts. "It was definitely a challenging experience. I was forced to learn and use the language, but that was a good thing."

This summer Pascoe will be at Florida State University, where she will conduct research in applied mathematics through another NSF Research Experience for Undergraduates program. Hedges plans to relax a little before entering the Ph.D. program at the University of Colorado, with an eye toward a career in college teaching.

— Jim Stewart